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# Networking Jumpstarts The Rep Experience

When it comes to defining the potential benefits of networking, perhaps no one has said it much better than Cy Charney in his recent book, *The Instant Sales Pro*. According to Charney, networking “can not only give you valuable contacts, it can also teach you what you have in common with others in your field. And it may suggest unusual approaches to common problems, things that you and your organization hadn’t thought of.”

As if testimonials are needed for the wisdom of those words, a host of independent manufacturers’ representatives voice instant agreement.

Gary Kavalar, CPMR, G-K Components, Inc., Glendale, Wisconsin, notes the fact that since the majority of rep firms are very small entities, there is a pressing need to get input from the outside world. “The majority of us, including me, are much smaller than 10-person operations,” he says. “As a result, being a rep can be a very lonely business. What we’ve done is create our own corporate culture, and it’s a very different culture from that which we might have enjoyed in our previous careers. Sure, we’re surrounded every day by the people we work with, but at the end of the day, you are your own business.

You are your own corporate culture.

“Since we gather and process information based on our own conclusions, it becomes imperative that we take advantage of input from other people. And it’s preferable that those people we seek out share the same rep experience that we do — but with a different twist. The different twist I speak about will allow us to fine tune our decision making.”

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## The Search for a Different View

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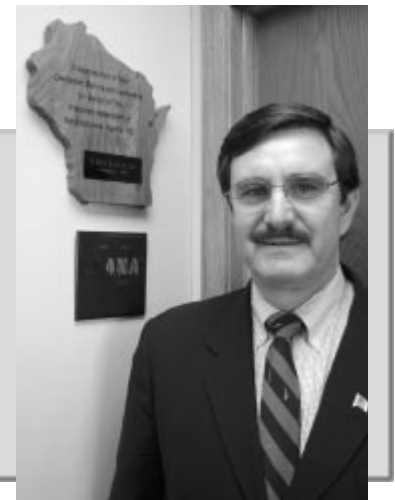
To gain a different twist or view, Kavalar explains that it’s “great to have a network of

friends with whom you can share ideas. Especially beneficial are the opportunities to share ideas on how to run an agency, personnel concerns, commissions and how to handle your territory. You can also compare notes on principals such as which manufacturers are good to work with and who you should stay away from.”

He adds that “You learn from your own peers about customer projects, local, regional, national and even international business. In addition, there’s also a benefit in communicating with reps from other industries. For instance, reps in the electronics business have already gone through experiences foreshadowing those

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**Gary Kavalar, CPMR**





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**David Levine, CPMR**

which are coming our way. By talking to them, you can better prepare yourself to adopt new methods of operation.”

“There are other specific circumstances when networking with peers can come in handy,” he says. “For instance, I had a disagreement on the subject of post-termination compensation with my largest principal last May. When that happened, I took my documentation and contract and met with my own attorney and three other reps that I knew had their own legal battles. Following those meetings, I took everyone’s input and incorporated it into my own decision. This approach led to me securing the money I was owed.”

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**Staying Warm in a Cold World**

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“It is a cold, cruel world out there,” maintains David Levine, CPMR, Abbey Sales Corporation, Northbrook, Illinois, “and networking keeps one from feeling

***“...when you’re in a networking environment you’re dealing with reps who are non-competitive.”***

**David LaFleur**

alone. Reps are usually an outgoing, friendly bunch, and they are quick to share their ‘secrets’ with you. There is a certain pride that comes along with sharing a good idea with a fellow rep. Some of our biggest lines have come from referrals from reps in other territories. I particularly enjoy the national events such as the Keystone Conference, as there is a wealth of brainpower in the same area, and the atmosphere is electric. There aren’t many people that really understand the rep business unless they are living it. It is interesting to see how others get their jobs done, from index cards to blackberries. We pride ourselves on being technically enabled, and when we share our expertise with others, it comes back to us tenfold.”

The positive experience of last fall’s Keystone Conference is also

fresh in the memory of James McCarry, president of Illuminations, Inc., Newtown Square, Pennsylvania, when he is asked about the benefits of networking among his rep peers. According to McCarry, “Keystone was the best example of an occasion where everyone present was able to benefit from everyone else. NEMRA, MANA and ERA members had similar, but non-competitive problems that they were able to discuss. It was a terrific example of what can happen when we all stop thinking as competitors and think more as businesspeople. The more we help others, the better off all of us will become.”

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**Gaining Input from Non-Competitors**

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**James McCarry**



networking environment,” explains David LaFleur, LaFleur & Associates, LLC, Sarasota, Florida, “you’re dealing with reps who are non-competitive. As such, you can let your hair down and share views, problems and solutions to problems more readily. You could be discussing something as simple as a new computer, marketing program, the cost of a phone system, marketing tricks or tips on the evaluation of principals. As long as you’re in a non-competitive situation, there’s very little threat to your business.”

In his capacity as president of MANA’s Southern California Chapter, Mike Keeney, Industrial Marketing Systems, Inc., Twin Peaks, California, has plenty of opportunities to experience first-hand the benefits of networking. “We all recognize the fact that for most reps who are working outside the corporate world, it can be a very lonely existence. The majority don’t have the colleagues they enjoyed when working for large corporations. They have no one with whom they can run by problems or ideas. I’d say the greatest benefit that comes with networking among peers is the ability to experience the kind of feedback reps need in order to do their jobs better. When reps get together, they can share experiences and ask and receive the answers to questions. And, there’s so much more to benefit from the experience of meeting other reps in person than there is when seeking the solution to a problem over the phone or via the Internet.”

As to whether current business and economic conditions place an even higher premium on reps meeting with other reps, Keeney offers that “It’s certainly extremely important now as we are



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**Mike Keeney**

going through a very difficult business environment.”

In terms of any advice on the subject of networking that he might offer to other reps, Keeney is quick to say taking advantage of networking opportunities — either through industry meetings, MANA chapters or other means — “It’s extremely important. Be sure to make plans to attend local meetings and stay in touch with the people who work like you do.”

### **Benefits Cross Industry Lines**

Another rep who shares Keeney’s involvement in the Southern California MANA Chapter is Gene Fields, South-West Independent Marketing (S.W.I.M.), Santa Ana, California. Fields, who works in the swimming pool and spa equipment business, notes that “I’m in an industry that is reasonably young — especially young when it comes to outsourcing the sales effort. At the same time, it’s very entrepreneurial. Over the years of my career, I’ve been involved in a lot of different industries — automotive, plumbing and chemical handling. Each one is totally different from the other. Hence, the

importance of networking. Meeting with and talking to reps who work in other industries lets you see how business is conducted on the other side of the fence. Whether it’s how to structure contracts, dealing with line losses, sharing tips for managing your sales personnel or hiring and firing, you can learn from others.”

Fields recommends that net-



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**Gene Fields**

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working for reps is “absolutely essential for a successful agency. I’ve made it a point to get involved in networking activities at every opportunity.” Part of that involvement comes in the form of MANA’s Southern California Chapter. “Our efforts are aimed at putting together programs that allow all of us to learn how each other handles their businesses. We conduct a lot of panel discussions and make sure we always include a wide cross section of people and industries.”

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### Matching Up vs. Others

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Benchmarking is the word used by Charles Librizzi, CPMR, Charles J. Librizzi Assoc., Inc., Palos Heights, Illinois, when he describes what he seeks in his various networking ventures. “For me, it’s all about benchmarking,” he says. “When you’re like us and work in your own little world, it’s easy to lose track of what others are doing. That’s why it’s important to talk with your fellow reps. I’m always looking to get a fix on how we rate compared to other agencies, and I only get that feedback by speaking with other reps.” He adds that a fairly recent example of a venue that allowed him to do a good job of benchmarking occurred with the Keystone Conference in Florida. “I’ve attended a lot of MANA meetings and this conference was simply the best I’ve ever attended. Just the input I got from discussions with others reps during informal discussions was very helpful and more than compensated for my expenses.”

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### “No-Name” Networking

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Being an active member of a

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**Dan Beaudet, CPMR**



“no-name networking group” has proved very beneficial to Dan Beaudet, CPMR, Dan Beaudet Company, Hooksett, New Hampshire. Several rep associations have employed the ‘no-name’ networking route, whereby similar reps from non-competitive, geographically separated territories meet on a regular basis to compare notes, share successes/problems and exchange business philosophies.

According to this New England-based rep, “In my experience, most of us are small agencies, not the ‘mega’ organizations. As a result, we have a need to connect with peer groups. The group I belong to is composed of reps in the decorative plumbing and hardware industries. We meet annually for a day and a half. Generally, our schedule is something like a full day of educational seminars, all aimed at getting us better at what we do for a living. Then we follow up with a half-day of battling around common issues. These can include problems we’ve encountered, new technology and methods to improve our people skills or negotiating methods. It’s really just a wide open discussion period.”

Typical of the type of benefi-

cial conversation that occurs during these sessions, according to Beaudet, occurred during a recent networking group meeting in Boston. “One of our speakers was a certified ACT contact management software consultant. Among our group there were long-time users as well as people who were still using an annual paper system. It’s incredible what we learned about using contact management software. It opened our eyes to things we could be accomplishing that we never knew about. In another session we had a local high-end showroom owner who stressed the need to have a closer integration of the efforts of reps and dealers. He emphasized how important it was to be cognizant

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**Charles Librizzi, CPMR**

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of each other's needs and how important it was to build our relationships. Overall, this was just an outstanding return on our investment of time."

Beaudet continues that the

importance of such networking activities is more important now than ever before. "For example, just consider the rate of mergers and consolidations that we've encountered. It seems like every-

one is ganging up on us. To survive we've got to be coming from a strong base, and we've got to be able to maintain our position in the territory. We can do that by learning from each other." □

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